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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS OBSERVATION IN BAS-CONGO

REF: Kinshasa 1064

11. (U) Summary. Elections in Bas-Congo proceeded calmly and with high voter turnout. EconOff observed election and post-election procedures at numerous polling sites July 28-August 1. EconOff witnessed no evidence of fraud, but did observe many procedural irregularities, most of which appeared to result from a lack of understanding or competence on the part of election workers. Confusion, however, marked vote counting and compilation. End Summary.

12. (U) EconOff traveled July 28 by car to the port town of Matadi, Bas-Congo province, a key import link for eastern Congo. A team of about 40 international observers, plus numerous national observers and political party witnesses watched proceedings in Matadi. July 29, EconOff drove round-trip to Boma, another port town and the country's first capital under Belgian rule. Along the 300-mile route from Kinshasa to Boma, EconOff saw many campaign posters and banners, but only in or near the main towns. No other campaign paraphernalia, such as t-shirts or caps, were visible. EconOff also saw two rallies underway, including a gathering in Kisantu of about two hundred people at the DRC's botanical garden in support of a female legislative candidate.

13. (U) Voter turnout was 70 percent or higher in several polling stations that EconOff visited. In a remote village 25 miles outside Matadi, the center had a turnout of about 80 percent, despite many having to walk as much as 11 miles round-trip, according to the center's manager.

14. (U) Voting itself proceeded peacefully, and it started and ended largely on time. EconOff's contacts, including a MONUC security officer, said that they were unaware of any incidents that occurred anywhere in Bas-Congo. Although some voters complained about waiting under the hot sun for two hours or more, they remained calm; with no significant exception, voters' conduct was orderly. EconOff saw police at every center, but did not see any intimidation or overzealous crowd control. Bunda dia Kongo (BDK), a Bas-Congo separatist group, caused no problems, despite expectations that they might after a June 30 riot in Matadi resulted in several of their members being killed in clashes with Congolese military (reftel).

15. (U) EconOff observed numerous problems with the voting process, although these were primarily in connection with non-standard voters, such as the disabled and those voting outside of their assigned bureaus. Several times EconOff saw several party witnesses (all from different political parties) simultaneously helping voters that the polling station manager deemed disabled. On one occasion, a woman voted in place of her mother, who was standing outside the voting booth. In fact, polling managers often defined "disability" to include illiteracy, and many poll workers complained that handling illiterate voters presented them with their greatest difficulties. Other irregularities included CEI staff failing to record disputes in the minutes or to check hands for ink marks, and

requesting a registration card but no certificate from a deputy candidate voting outside his assigned center. By contrast, voters seemed to understand their duties reasonably well with assistance from the voting staff. Their only real confusion was that many had no idea what candidate to select, particularly at the legislative level. (Note: In Matadi, voters chose from about 60 legislative candidates. End note.)

¶6. (U) The counting process was noticeably more confusing and disorganized. At the site where EconOff watched the vote counting, the pre-count administrative procedures themselves took two and a half hours because the staff had difficulty counting unused ballots and figuring out how to fill in the forms provided to record the minutes of the proceedings. In fact, the staff did not even know it had to complete separate minutes for the presidential and legislative elections. The secretary of the polling station did not record any disputes, despite a woman who tried to vote telling EconOff that polling staff informed her someone had already voted under her name. The other main difficulty was that political party witnesses and Congolese observers involved themselves in the tallying process. For example, some helped count unused ballots and offered their opinion on decisions concerning null ballots. One vociferous national observer even grabbed ballots and yelled at the polling station staff when he disagreed with their decision, nearly coming to fisticuffs with one poll worker.

¶7. (U) The compilation process was even more chaotic. The center managers did not seem to be aware of any pre-assigned pick-up time, requiring many to wait several hours the next day after they had slept in the voting stations with the ballots and other material. EconOff saw the assembled materials arriving heavily-guarded at the compilation center, which itself had numerous police inside and outside its gates. In addition, some center managers were sitting with their documents. However, EconOff saw many other sets of results lying about in unwatched stacks, particularly the second day

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after elections. To clear space in the compilation room, EconOff saw center staff temporarily moving the results of Matadi's 71 polling centers outside the building, causing substantial disorder.

¶8. (U) Comment: Overall, good intentions but substantial confusion marked Bas-Congo's elections. End comment.